

Applying Conspectus at QUT Library

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INTRODUCTION

Conspectus is such a time-consuming exercise, that it behoves us to get the very maximum benefit from it. This is the attitude we have taken at QUT. After all the counting and list checking and systems reports, and for all its faults and shortcomings, conspectus is a way of putting a comparable, quantifiable value on the library's collections that our users and university administrators can come to grips with. They can see that the chemistry collection at 3b is capable of supporting research at post graduate level while the art collection at 1b won't support any courses at even undergraduate level. This forms the basis of arguments for funding to the people who have control of the money.

BACKGROUND

In 1990, QUT was formed from the amalgamation of the former QUT/QIT and the BCAE. In common with the other new universities, QUT was keen to expand quickly into research. The ability of the existing library collections to support research was very much in doubt. In 1991, Janice Rickards, then one of the Associate University Librarians at QUT undertook a conspectus of the collections as they supported the work of the 10-12 newly established university research centres. As a result of this work, the university gave the library funds to bring the collections up to 3b level.

In 1991-1992, the library did a full conspectus of all its collections. In 1994, we redid the conspectus for the university research centre collections, in order to evaluate their (hoped for) improvement and to assess the ongoing funding required to support them once Australian federal funding Mechanism B stopped. By 1994, our work with conspectus was well known within the university, and at the request of the University's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Advancement, the library undertook conspectus of the collections as they supported the courses offered by a sample of 8 of our schools. This year the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Advancement has provided funding of \$90,000 to the library to undertake a conspectus of our collections as they support school research centres and research concentrations.

The library also uses conspectus results and methodology to prepare library impact statements on the ability of the collections to support new courses. This statement is prepared as part of the university's course accreditation process. At least one proposed course was rejected because there were inadequate library resources to support it. On other occasions, the library has received off the top funding from the university to purchase necessary books and journals to support new courses.

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CENTRES

The conspectus done in 1991 was repeated in 1994 for the collections of each of the 12 university centres. The centres serve as the focii for postgraduate research and funding within the university. The library has attracted nearly \$2 million between 1991 and 1995 funding to build these collections. The funding has been on top of the normal Acquisitions vote and has comprised Federal Government Mechanism B, Australian Research Council, Federal Government Quality and University funds. The second conspectus report in 1994, demonstrated that the funding had resulted in an overall improvement in these collections. Most are now at 3b level. The funding includes 10% for library staffing to process the orders and catalogue the materials. The library has assurances that the funding for research centre collections will continue. This year we had a funding increase of 30% over 1994 levels, due to the reassessment of continuing funding needs for the collections. Conspectus has provided our senior university administrators with evidence that they got value for their \$2 million investment! (This doesn't happen often at their level). As a result, the conspectus levels were a feature of the University's Quality submissions for federal funding in 1994.

The conspectus also identified weaknesses in the collections. These are being addressed in selection work done by liaison librarians and academics. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Advancement has just provided the library with funding of \$90000 to undertake conspectus of the collections supporting the 36 school research centres and research concentrations. This will pay for replacement staff to release liaison librarians to prepare the reports.

There are some problems with using conspectus for research centre collections. Firstly, there can be a disparity between the research centres' goals which may be quite broad, and the areas of research actually undertaken, which may narrow to the interests of a few academics. This makes it difficult for the librarians to define the subjects to be covered. Collection building in these areas can become irrelevant when the focus of research changes or these staff move on. Secondly, centres can be downgraded or become extinct, leaving the library with a somewhat wasted, dated investment and no funds to support the remaining serial subscriptions.

SCHOOLS CONSPECTUS

Last year, at the request of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Advancement, we did conspectus on the collections as they supported the courses in a sample of 8 schools. He was good enough to provide us with extra money to provide staffing. The most important feature is that the conspectus levels pertain exactly to the areas in which we teach. It is easy to see whether we have collections at an adequate level to serve our teaching needs. Normally in the conspectus discipline areas, the outcomes are

watered down by the inclusion of subjects which are not taught and therefore are at an introductory or minimal level. We found that the collections in some areas are woefully inadequate for our teaching requirements. These areas have consequently been targeted for collection building from Quality funds in the library's bids. As a result of this work, the Faculty of Health has asked the library to undertake school conspectus reports on the collections that support its courses. The benefits from this work, have been to identify areas of weakness in the collection for consequent collection building. This linking of courses and collection makes the conspectus work more relevant in practical terms to both library staff and academics.

LIBRARY IMPACT STATEMENTS

The Library prepares a library impact statement for every new course as part of the university's course accreditation process. We also prepare them for proposed new research centres/concentrations. The purpose is to:

- Identify areas of collection relevant to the course
- Identify areas of weakness in the collection
- Provide an estimate of costs associated with remedying any shortfalls in the collection on a both retrospective and ongoing basis

The library has written guidelines for preparing these statements. A most important feature is the estimate of costs to bring the collection to an adequate level to support the course or research. There are a variety of methodologies outlined which can be used to make these estimates. I would like to acknowledge the outstanding work of Judy Stokker and Jess Burke in developing these guidelines.

Since we began to provide these reports, we have received additional funding from the university to build the collections to support three new courses. This funding was built in to the costs when the university agreed to the course. Access to the funding has been provided this year, prior to the courses beginning in 1996. This gives the library the chance to build the collections before the students arrive. Orders can be placed without delay, because the liaison librarian has already identified material required for the collection. Problems can occur when the impact statement identifies collection shortfalls, but the course is accepted without provision for funding. In these cases, the library will have to approach the Head of School for additional funding. It's too early yet to know how successful this will be. Difficulties also arise when reading lists change after the appointment of new lecturers, and in estimating the number of multiple copies required for new courses a year in advance.

FULL CONSPECTUS

The full conspectus was completed in 1992. The librarians who prepared the conspectus also wrote summary reports on our holdings in each discipline area. These reports are included in the Library Collection Development Policy

which is due for release shortly. The full conspectus is the foundation for the school and centre conspectuses, and the library impact statements. We may use comparative conspectus database reports with our benchmark partners as part of our 5 year Library review.

CONCLUSION

The availability of conspectus methodology coincided with the QUT's attainment of university status and its drive to build on its teaching reputation and expand into research. Conspectus provided the tool to quantify collection shortfalls and funding needs. As a result, the library has benefited handsomely from extra funding of over \$2 million in the past 5 years.

The library has built on conspectus work to produce specialised conspectus reports for research centres, schools and library impact statements. The Collection Development Policy includes conspectus reports to guide selection. We have formed a working party to investigate ways of closing the loop between our conspectus reports and selection. Without doubt, the Librarians have a much deeper and more thorough knowledge of the collection as a result of doing conspectus work. It also provides a way of handing collection knowledge on from experienced staff to new staff.

For all its faults, conspectus provides librarians and university managers with quantifiable indications of the adequacy of the collections. Administrators and academics seldom have the time to grasp the fine points of collection assessment but they can readily appreciate that a "good" collection is 3b and very poor one is 1b.

The conspectus spotlight has shone brightly but warmly on the growth of QUT Library's collections in the last 5 years..

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